

THE MIDDLE TEMPLE MURDER

A Detective Story by J. S. Fletcher

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SYNOPSIS

THIS STARTS THE STORY
Frank Spargo, a young London newspaper man, returning home from his work late one night sees a couple of men peering into a corner of an alleyway. Investigation reveals a man dead, murdered. It seemed that his pocket was found the name "Ronald B. Barrister, King's Bench Walk, Temple, London." Berton ascertains he does not know the man. At his hotel the man had registered as "John Marbury." He received but one visitor, a tall well-dressed man with a gray beard. He paid for whisky and soda from a handful of sovereigns but did not leave a penny piece. A man sitting next to Marbury while lobbying in the House of Commons, tells of his excitement on the appearance of a tall man with a gray beard—Stephen Aylmore, M. P. They left the House together. The hotel keeper shows Spargo a shining piece of stone—a diamond—found in his room, and the waiter testifies to having seen a number of these stones on Marbury's table while Aylmore was visiting him. Aylmore is visited and admits to having known the man and to his visit the night before. Aylmore's daughter, Jessie, is engaged to marry Berton, who is the adopted son of Mr. Elphick, also an attorney. Ronald B. Barrister, of Scotland Yard, is working on the case with Spargo.

Spargo receives a visit from A. P. Myers, secretary to the man who Marbury had rented a safe from him and deposited a small leather bag therein, remarking at the time, "That box is safe now. But it's been safer, too—far safer and more secure." "Did you ask him what he meant?" asked Spargo. "Oh, no, not at all," replies Myers. "Then you missed one of the best opportunities I ever heard of," said Spargo.

(AND HERE IT CONTINUES)

HE PAUSED, as if it were not worth while to continue, and turned to Rathbury, who was regarding him with amusement.

"Look here, Rathbury," he said, "it is possible that that box opened. It probably contains the clue we want. I'm going to ask Mr. Myers to go with me just now to take the first steps about having it opened. I shall have to get an order. We may get the matter through today, but at any rate, we'll have it done tomorrow morning."

"Can you arrange for me to be present when that comes off?" asked Spargo. "You can—certainly. That's all right," Rathbury said. "Now, if you'll ring me up or come round if you hear anything, and I'll do the same by you."

And without further word, Spargo went quickly away on his business card, returned to the Watchman office. There the assistant, who had been told off to wait upon his orders during this new episode, met him with a business card. "This gentleman came in to see," said about an hour ago, Mr. Spargo, "he said, 'He thinks he can tell you something about the Marbury affair, and he said that as he couldn't wait, perhaps you'd step round to his place when you came in.'"

Spargo took the card and read: Mr. James Criddle, Dealer in Philatelic rarities, 2,021, Strand.

Spargo put the card in his waistcoat pocket and went out again, wondering why Mr. James Criddle could not wait, or why he should call himself a dealer in rare postage stamps, and so on plain English. He went up Fleet street and soon found the shop indicated on the card, and his first glance at its exterior showed that whatever business might have been done by Mr. Criddle in the past at that establishment there was to be none done there in the future by him, for there was newly printed bills in the window announcing that the place was to let. And inside he found a short, portly, elderly man who was superintending the packing up and removal of the last of his stock.

He turned a bright, inquiring eye on the journalist.

"Mr. Criddle?" said Spargo.

"The same, sir," answered the philatelist. "You are—?"

"Mr. Spargo, of the Watchman. You are on me."

Mr. Criddle opened the door of a tiny apartment at the rear of the very little shop and motioned his caller to enter. He followed him in and carefully closed the door.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Spargo," he said genially. "Take a seat, sir—I'm all in confusion here—giving up business, you see. Yes, I called on you, I think, having read the Watchman account of that Marbury affair, and having seen your column, and I can give you a bit of information."

"Material?" asked Spargo, tersely.

Mr. Criddle cocked one of his bright eyes at his visitor. "I called on you," he said, "to decide—when you've heard it," he said, "I should say, considering everything, that it was material. Well, it's this—I kept open until yesterday—everything as usual, you know—stock in the window and so on—that anybody who was passing would naturally be brought to a halt by the business was going on, though as a matter of fact, I'm retiring—retired," added Mr. Criddle with a laugh. "Last night, however, when you take down what I've got to tell you," answered Spargo. "Every word, in my head," Mr. Criddle laughed and rubbed his hands.

"Oh," he said, "Ah, well, in my young days journalists used to pull out pencil and notebook at the first opportunity. But you modern young men—"

"Just so," agreed Spargo. "This information, now?"

"Well," said Mr. Criddle, "we'll go on then. Yesterday afternoon the man described as Marbury came into my shop. He—"

"What time—exact time?" asked Spargo.

"Two—to the very minute by St. Clement's clock," answered Mr. Criddle. "I'd a clock, as I said, at that point. He was precisely as I described him—dress, everything—tall, thin, I knew his photo as I saw it. He was carrying a little box."

"What sort of box?" asked Spargo.

"A queer, old-fashioned, much-worn leather box—a very miniature trunk, a fact," replied Mr. Criddle. "About never set square; the sort of thing you would see nowadays. It was very much worn. He set it on the counter and stamped—stamped?" he said. "I am, to show you," he said, unlocking the box. "It's a bit—"

"Did he take the key from with which he unlocked the box?"

"It was one of several which he carried on a split ring, and he took the key," replied Mr. Criddle. "Oh, I well—he opened his box."

"It seemed to me to be full of papers

—at any rate there were a lot of legal-looking documents on the top, tied up with red tape. To show you how I notice things I saw that the papers were stained with age, and that the red tape was faded to a mere wash of pink."

"Good—good," murmured Spargo. "Excellent! Proceed, sir."

"He put his hand under the top-most paper and drew out an envelope," continued Mr. Criddle. "From the envelope he produced an exceedingly rare, exceedingly valuable set of Colonial stamps—the very first ever issued. I've just come from Australia. He said, 'I promised a young friend of mine out there to sell these stamps for him in London, and as I was passing this way I caught sight of your shop. Will you buy 'em, and how much will you give for 'em?'"

"I bought," muttered Spargo.

"He seemed to me the sort of man who doesn't waste words," agreed Mr. Criddle. "Well, there was no doubt about the stamps, nor about their great value. But I had to explain to him that I was retiring from business that very day, and did not wish to enter into even a single deal, and that, therefore, I couldn't do anything. 'No matter,' he says, 'I dare say there are lots of men in your line of trade—perhaps you can recommend me to a good client. I'll call on you and you to a dozen extra-good stamps. I answered, 'But I can do better for you. I'll give you the name and address of a private buyer who, I have no doubt, will be very glad to buy that set from you and will give you a big price.' 'Write it down,' he says, and then you'll be all right. So I gave him a bit of advice as to the price he ought to get, and I wrote the name and address of the man I referred to on the back of one of my cards."

"What name and address?" asked Spargo.

"Mr. Nicholas Cardstone, 2, Pilox Buildings, Middle Temple Lane," replied Mr. Criddle. "Mr. Cardstone is one of the most enthusiastic and accomplished philatelists in Europe. And I knew he didn't possess that set of stamps."

"I know Mr. Cardstone," remarked Spargo. "It was at the foot of his stairs that Marbury was found murdered."

"Just so," said Mr. Criddle. "Which makes me think that he was going to see Mr. Cardstone when he was set upon, murdered and robbed."

Spargo looked fixedly at the retired stamp-dealer.

"What, going to see an elderly gentleman in his room in the Temple, to offer to sell him philatelic rarities at just midnight?" he said. "I think—not much."

"All right," replied Mr. Criddle. "You think and argue on modern lines—which are, of course, highly superior. But—how do you account for my having given Marbury Mr. Cardstone's address and for his having been found dead—murdered—at the foot of Cardstone's stairs a few hours later?"

"I don't account for it," said Spargo to him.

"I'm trying to," said Mr. Criddle. "Mr. Criddle made no comment on this. He looked his visitor up and down for a moment; gathered some idea of his capabilities and suddenly offered him a cigarette."

Spargo accepted it with a laconic word of thanks, and smoked half-way through it. "This gentleman came in to see," said about an hour ago, Mr. Spargo, "he said, 'He thinks he can tell you something about the Marbury affair, and he said that as he couldn't wait, perhaps you'd step round to his place when you came in.'"

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By Sidney Smith

PETEY—He Gets His Wish

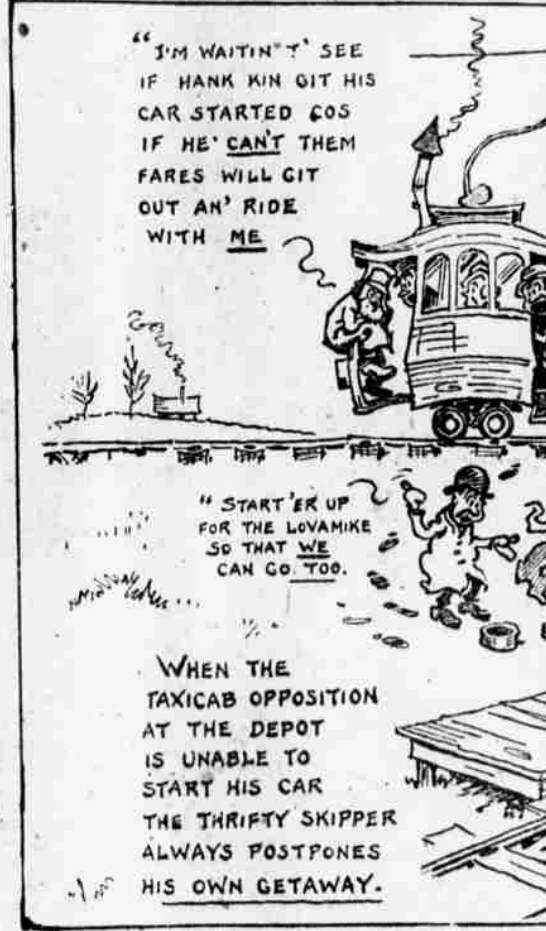


By C. A. Voight

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(CONTINUED TOMORROW)